

# SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

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*Fifth Avenue · New York City*

**Sunday, February 12, 2023**

The Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany (Sexagesima)

**Festal Eucharist**

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Luigi Gioia, *Theologian in Residence*

on

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:21-37

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## **Cherishing Anger**

As you might know, the Rule of St Benedict was written in the 6<sup>th</sup> century for monks and nuns, that is for people who dedicate their lives to seeking God through worship, work, study, and hospitality in a community. People who devote themselves to a life-style of this kind remain human and exposed to failings like everyone else, but one would hope not to the temptation to murder one another. St Benedict was not so sure! At the beginning of the fourth chapter of his Rule, called “The Tool for Good Works”, he says

First of all, love the Lord God with your whole heart, your whole soul and all your strength, and love your neighbour as yourself. Then the following: You are not to kill.<sup>1</sup>

The first time I read this passage, as a very young novice, I was taken aback by this juxtaposition: one moment you are invited to love your brother, the next you are entreated not to kill him! What was I supposed to make of it? Mercifully I never witnessed any murder during the thirty years or so of my life as a monk, nor was ever threatened to be killed. What I witnessed however, was anger – and a great deal of it.

Or rather, anger is something I became aware of after I had been a monk for more than 15 years. I had seen people get angry before of course, but only with time I started to perceive how ubiquitous and, surprisingly, how essential anger is.

You might know that when someone decides to join monastic life, he is entrusted to the care and guidance of a “novice master”. This is an immensely demanding role. I know this because I held this position myself for five years – some of the most challenging years of my life, but also, without question, the years in which I think I got some of my deepest insights into human nature. When I said earlier that I became aware of the omnipresence of anger only after 15 years of monastic life, it is because it was when I became a novice master that I had to face anger in ways I had never been exposed to before - the novices’ anger and, of course, my own.

It is not uncommon for young monastics, after one or two years of community life, to have the impression of having become worse than they were before joining the monastery: they feel cold inside, unable to pray, dismayed by wave after wave of unmanageable crises and feelings of insecurity, envy, anxiety, jealousy, frustration, touchiness, and often frank exasperation (just like in marriage, as many of you might be thinking right now!). They cannot understand why they get involved in unhealthy conflicts on often insignificant issues. There are headaches, nervousness, irritability, and above all a heavy sense of guilt. At first, I thought

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<sup>1</sup> The Rule of St. Benedict in English (p. 26). Liturgical Press. Kindle Edition.

this must be an anomaly, the sign that I was not being a competent counsellor to them, or that there must have been a problem in my community. Then, little by little, I realized that just the contrary was true: this was the sign that community life was actually working. I understood that common life works its magic, so to speak, precisely by bringing to the surface everything which is unresolved in our lives, psychologically and emotionally, and forcing us to deal with it. This is unpleasant of course, makes us feel threatened, and triggers a survival mechanism similar to what an animal feels when it is in danger – hence the anger. Since however we have been taught to feel guilty about anger, that it should not be allowed, we try to suppress it by internalizing it, and by doing so, we risk wasting all its positive energy.

Positive energy, yes! It became clear to me that anger – again my own and that of other people- was not something to be afraid of, but rather to cherish. And this for a simple reason, namely that *anger never lies*. It is always a cry for help which we have failed to pay attention to and which cannot be ignored any more. When we feel anger or irritation chances are that there is something crucial in ourselves, in our lives, in our relationships that needs care and dedication, and for good measure a dash of imagination.

You might be wondering whether by saying this I am not contradicting the page of the gospel proclaimed a moment ago:

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment.

In this passage however, Jesus is not warning us against anger per se, but the anger directed against a brother or a sister. Indeed, most of the time, when we are angry at someone chances are that that person is not the *cause* of our anger, but simply its *occasion*. There is something unresolved, in my psyche, my past, my life, the context in which I operate that threatens me – my body senses the danger before even I have been able to perceive it with my mind, hence the anger, this animal energy, which lashes out at the first unfortunate human being who happens to come first within range.

When, in the book of Genesis, we are told that “Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast” (4.5), God does not tell him “Cain suppress your anger” – on the contrary, he asks him this most caring and poignant question: “*Why* are you angry? *Why* is your face downcast”? The problem when we are angry is that “our face is downcast”, we lower our gaze, get swallowed by our pain, and thus get disconnected from reality. There yes tragically murder can happen – and, as we know, there are many ways of murdering others: slandering them, ignoring or despising them, pushing their buttons, hindering and provoking them with passive aggression.

God is not afraid of anger, he wants us to face it, probe it, be in conversation with it. He wants us to ask ourselves: “*Why* are you angry? *Why* is your face downcast”? The only way of taking anger seriously is to raise our gaze, reconnect with our horizon, regain some context, search deeper within ourselves, refuse to reduce the other person to the hurt he or she might have caused to us or, more often than not, simply elicited from us.

When dealing with anger we should let resonate in us this magnificent sentence from the book of Deuteronomy we heard in the first reading: “Choose life”!

Anger is life. It is the proof that we are alive and that we want to stay so.

There is a very simple way of never getting angry: give up life, that is avoid all relations with other people, never go out, do nothing. To a hermit who took pride in the fact that he never got angry, a wise monk replied: “Even the tiger is all meekness when it lies alone and undisturbed in its lair”.

Part of what it takes to choose life is accepting that anger is part of what we need to be alive. Anger is pure energy, which like any other form of energy, can be destructive only if we do not take care to harness it to sustain life.

Thus, paradoxically, the only way of avoiding murder in all its forms is taking anger seriously, is *cherishing* anger. If you think there is none in your life, chances are that you are ignoring it or suppressing it. Most of our undetected anger gets redirected against ourselves in the form of guilt, low self-esteem, self-sabotage, and sometimes even physical illness.

Crucially, cherishing anger is the only way of *not* getting angry at one another and at ourselves – it is the exact contrary – it is the only antidote to murder, it is the choice of life, for ourselves and for everyone else around us.